

Universités populaires in France: from roots to present times

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To help understand the French movement of *Universités populaires (UPs)*, a brief history of the movement and its origins will be presented. The objectives and current preoccupations of the French *Universités populaires* will then be given.

The birth of the French *Universités populaires* - late 19th century

They appeared in France at the end of the 19th century, within a fourfold context:

- the recent establishment of the French Republic
- the workers movement
- the positivist movement
- the Dreyfus affair

At the beginning, after 1875, **the Third Republic** was a fragile regime. The first preoccupation of the Republicans, facing the Monarchists and the Catholic Church, was therefore to strengthen the regime. This included an appropriate education for children (and the establishment of a non-religious*, free and compulsory school system) and for adults as well, particularly for the culturally more modest and resourceless ones. Appropriate structures were therefore needed.

* cf. the French concept of *Laïcité*

This was very near the preoccupations of **the working class movement**. After the disastrous episode of the working class revolution, «*La Commune de Paris*» (1871), the workers movement needed restructuring, and needed founding «a proletarian elite, living core of the future society», wrote George Deherme* who thought necessary to erase social differences, and that this could be achieved through education. So did the liberal bourgeoisie who, for the sake of economical efficiency, was attached to social pacification and national solidarity, in a France which had not forgotten the French revolution and its bloody episodes. This was a serious political challenge, particularly at a time when the Catholics were trying to reconquer the working class (cf. Encyclical «*Rerum novarum*», May 1891, Léon XIII).

* George Deherme (1870-1937)
libertarian typographer, journalist

In order to achieve this education of the people, Georges Deherme and his friends believed in the creation of a higher popular education whose aim would not basically be utilitarian instruction, but rather directed towards social emancipation, and whose work would be based on principles and values. G. Deherme believed in a method - mutual education, based on the sharing of all fields of knowledge (from hygiene to philosophy), and in an academic framework of reference - that of social sciences. These had then acquired acknowledgment, with the works of Auguste Comte (1798- 1857) which led to **the Positivist Movement**.

What about **the Dreyfus Affair**? Its influence on the creation of the *Universités populaires* movement may well have been exaggerated. However the Affair *did* have an influence; but as a mere pulling of the trigger or as a temporary factor consolidating deeper causes. The crisis emerging from the Dreyfus Affair was a telltale sign, leading to this point: public opinion was prey to préjugé and prejudice and people were hardly capable of exercising a critical mind. For many, it was necessary to educate the people, and therefore to set up *Universités populaires*.

This was achieved in 1899. When inaugurating «*La Coopération des Idées*» on October 9, 1899, George Deherme was in fact creating the first *Université populaire* and launching a movement which was establishing the get together of intellectuals and working class militants. This was not only a Paris affair. Montpellier, Lorient, Tours, Bourges, and many other cities created *Universités populaires* then. The phenomenon was indeed a urban one: big cities and *Préfectures* were involved; the connection between *Universités populaires* and cities was definite. (In Bourges, it is noticeable that the first *Université populaire* - an initiative of the *Bourse du travail* («*Labour Board*») in 1899- was inaugurated, on November 15, 1900, with the help of the city authorities. By 1908, this *Association* of «*mutual education*» counted 1000 members.

In many parts of France, similar initiatives took place, up to the 1910s. But the resolution of the Dreyfus Affair, reluctant connections between the *Bourses du travail* and the *UPs*, and of course WW1 enfeebled the movement and often put an end to it.

The political context between 1934-1935, which saw the success of *Le Front populaire*, led to a revival of the *Universités populaires* movement. Thus, in Bourges, under the initiative of philosopher and Gymnasium teacher Simone Weil, a «*Université ouvrière*» was created in January 1936... but only for a short period of time. On top of a time-consuming involvement in politics and the *Front populaire*, difficult relations between intellectuals and trade unionists put an end to this second experience.

In spite of this short revival, very few among the first generation of *Universités populaires* pursued their activity, like in Limoges or Lille. When WW2 was declared, in 1939, *UPs* stopped being priorities.

The revival of the French *Universités populaires* - post WW2

This revival was neither due to former *UPs* nor to a nation-wide plan, nor to a reference to a unique model. It was rather due to the coincidence of a general favorable context and local initiatives which, at the beginning, had no reference to the first generation of *UPs*.

What was this favorable context? After WW2, the population growth was such that Universities, in the academic sense of the word, were both overwhelmed by the amount of students and questioned for their rigidity (cf. the Events of May 1968). During the «*thirty glorious years*» period of economic boom (1945- 1975), the French society was more and more of a consuming type, including culture-consuming; and academic Universities could not meet these needs. The growth of cultural need, the lack of appropriate response, the involvement of intellectuals like Ivan Illich formed a favorable hotbed to the emergence of new forms of education of adults.

A first step, during the 1960s, was the concept of «*Animation*» (ie. community activities), far away from school-like activities. The concept of «*Education populaire*» was both militant and professional . Several *UPs* sprang up then : in Mulhouse (1963), Châlon-sur-Saône, Chenove, etc ... thus joining some *UPs* created after the Liberation- such as Strasbourg, Rosny- sous- Bois, etc...

In 1981, when the Left came to power, France made friends with its teachers ; and an ideology of shared knowledge spread out (the title of the *AUPF* journal is «*Le Savoir Partagé*» - a motto created in Bourges (ie. «Shared knowledge»). Other *UPs* appeared in this context, like in Bourges (1981) and the movement quickly developed, and is still developing.

The conditions of emergence of these new *UPs* were and are noticeably different. Some could be a continuation of former similar structures; others came up from academic Universities, or were initiated by University members, like in Bourges; others yet were created to revive rural surroundings. Some were an extension of political parties, others asserted their independence.

But not a single one among these referred to the Dreyfus Affair- at least at the beginning; and there was no unity. They constituted a nebula of isolated initiatives, copying without being aware of doing so old structures, and with no memories of their origins.

Only in 1982 did the collective history of *Universités populaires* started. Thus in March 1982, under the initiative of the *Université populaire du Rhin*, a first annual conference brought together 10 *UPs* and «*Universités de quartier*» («District Universities»). Another conference – an international one, in Mulhouse again, with the participation of Swiss and German *Volkshochschulen* and Mrs Avice, Minister of Leisure and Ivan Illich, followed in 1983. It opened a debate on the *Université Populaire* concept... with sometimes very antagonistic positions.

Since then, these International Conferences have adopted an annual pace (every November), and have become an intense instant in the life of the French *Universités Populaires*. These Annual Conferences (or «*Colloques*») have definitely been determining for a national and collective organisation in France.

This was not achieved easily because of ideological disagreements about the *UP* movement; each structure being very sensitive about its independence... And there were a few clashes between leading figures. In spite of the reduced numbers of structures involved during this first period of national organisation, an issue of power was at stake . But the desire to get organised on a nation-wide scale was there and led to a structure, first called «*Fédération des UP de France*» , then «*Fondation pour l'Université populaire*» , before becoming what it currently is : «*Association des Universités populaires de France* – or *AUPF*».

These annual meetings helped the French *UPs* understand what they had inherited from the first generation of *UPs* , thence to inscribe into a common and collective history – including a European one, with a reference to N. F. S. Grundtvig, and find its place within a geographic space - again a European one, thanks to regular contacts with structures from other countries, by discovering their own challenges, issues and performances.

This national structure, the *AUPF*, has enjoyed a real boom under the leadership of its current President, Denis Rambaud, who brought the number of *UPs* within the AUPF up to over 100 (this including structures who do a similar work to what we do in *Universités Populaires: Universités du Troisième Age, Universités du Temps Libre*, etc... . These 100 or so «*UPs*» mean about 100,000 members, and a few thousand members in the teaching staff. Which is significant... but very far from the German or Austrian *Volkshochschulen*. But the vitality of the national structure is there, which accounts for the election of national French President Denis Rambaud to the EAEA Executive Board.

Objectives: where do the French *Universities Populaires* stand now?

One can say that the first and foremost objective is shared knowledge - knowledge as a factor of freedom, and knowledge and culture as necessary to access freedom of mind and free will. The finality there is clearly a humanist one. The ambition being to provide each and all with a better understanding of the world they live in, and thus act more efficiently, or at least knowingly. This implies *UPs* being involved on different scales: local / national / European and global ones and act as an intermediary between these different scales of action.

The second objective is the creation or refounding of a social link, in a society where individualism seems to prevail. A social link between people from different social classes, age groups, and qualifications. (Re)founding a social link is also reintegrating people who risk dropping out or who already have.

The third objective is education to citizen awareness, to face the deficiency of democracy. We can notice here a filiation and similarity between today's objectives and those of the original *UPs*. But the current geography of the *UPs* is different from the original one.

Where are the French *UPs* located? *(see map)*

They are far more numerous south of a Mont-de-Marsan-Strasbourg line than north of it. But new *UPs* are enjoying a boom in the West and in the Parisian region, although the French *UPs* tend to be set up in small or medium- sized cities, which corresponds to the urban frame of our country. And they do exist as well in rural areas.

Concerning this spontaneous dispersion , the *AUPF* has adopted a strategy of regional organisation by identifying a resource structure (cf. *Universités Populaires* of Albi, Bourges, Mulhouse, Romans) and, in the last 3 years, by encouraging the creation of a regional frame which brings together the *UPs* of the same administrative region, so as to join forces to face local and regional authorities and, in the respect of their individual independence, give a regional coherence to their action.

The diversity of the French *UPs* : they are indeed very different from each others; and in many ways:

- different local contexts:

. depending or not on local authorities

- . developing or not within a competitive cultural environment
- . developing in cities of different size and different social profiles
- . etc...

- different activities:

- . some UPs get exclusively involved in a culture of leisure
- . some provide certifications or find a place within official plans of the French State for the Education of adults
- . some adopt an academic entry
- . some are preoccupied by sociale issues and integration

One can notice that in some *UPs* these different ways of getting involved may be combined. In others, a few have developed specific or original activities (for example computing for the blind in Romans, oenology in Bourges, bookbinding in Ruelle, etc.) - without excluding other activities.

- diversity of operating procedures

- . some *UPs* have a professionalized management and a significant number of employees
- . some only work thanks to volunteer work
- . some mix both systems
- . some *UPs* have both a President and a board ; others do not
- . some have a frequent turn over whereas others do not
- . etc...

Current preoccupations within the French movement of Universités Populaires:

In the last 20 years, even though some have endured, our preoccupations have moved. Among the lasting preoccupations, I would mention technical ones: evolving within the limits of the law for the running and financing of the structures; being able to integrate schemes developed by the state (*cf. the DIF : Droit Individuel à la Formation*). One could have thought these (ever)lasting questions might have found a solution; but the current context is different. Interaction with the State, regional or local authorities has changed (*cf. decentralisation for example*). Managing and running our structures is therefore important, and each year, the statistics and the numbers of participants are a real preoccupation for the Presidents or Executive Boards. And we tend to think in terms of being attractive and marketing much more than we used to. ... One may wonder if this evolution will permit to remain faithful to the ethics of our movement (this preoccupation was the motif of one of our Annual Conferences).

Not many years ago, we would concentrate on contents more, as the titles of some of our Annual Conferences suggest : «*UPs and languages*» , «*UPs and History*», etc. But the interrogation on the contents remain one of our current preoccupations – particularly concerning the proportion of education which should be devoted to «*basic skills*»; both in terms of welcoming immigrants and in terms of dealing with a cultural and economic pauperisation of the French population.

We can notice too that other motives have emerged to question us, and send us back to our system of values, to societal changes, to an in the depth thinking . Here are a few of the recent motives of our Annual Conferences:

- « *Université populaire* and social link: a choice for action» (1995, Uzès)
- « Time for meaning » (2000, Vichy)
- « Social link confronted to new technologies »: (2001, Bourges)
- « Alterity- Identity » (2002, Moulins)
- « How can popular education help overcome noncivic attitudes and/ or individualism »? (2003, Bonneville)
- « Building up an autonomy within an uncertain society » (2006, Bobigny)

This does not imply that the question of knowledge has disappeared from our preoccupations ; and our next Annual Conference (November 2007, Romans) will be focused on « Cultures, culture: what knowledge to be shared ? »

These motives are dealt with in different ways during our Annual Conferences (*Café philo*, *Carrefour européen* and workshops) ; which enables different *UPs* to find their own place within a common movement dedicated to lifelong learning and at the same time preserve their own identity.

Other questions are emerging as well:

- our relation to local authorities
- relation and ratio between militancy et consumerism
- making different and varied publics cohabit and meet within our *UPs*
- etc...

Conclusion:

The situation I have been presenting is a succinct one. It would deserve further development and more nuance. But we may keep in mind the picture of a rich action within the French *Universités Populaires* movement , though definitely not as strong and powerful as other similar movements in Europe.

And we, *UP* managers, know we have a lot to learn from other countries, at the same time as we are ready to help emerging structures, for example in central and oriental Europe.

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Université populaire du Berry: <http://www.upberry.org>

AUPF (Association des Universités populaires de France): <http://www.universitepopulaire.eu>